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FEEDING THE CITY OF MEXICO

by Chloe McKinney

MEXICO, IDRC -- Before going to work each day, Rosa Fernandez lines up at six in the morning to buy milk, beans, rice, noodles, coffee, sugar and cooking oil at the government subsidized store CONASUPO (Compania nacional de subsistencias populares). But prices are rising wildly; cooking oil went up by a staggering 300 percent in the last year.

Once a week Rosa sets off on the four-hour round trip to a new market in Atizapan on the city's northwestern outskirts. With the two youngest children in tow to help her carry things, she tries to buy enough fruit and vegetables to last the week. If there is money left over she buys eggs, meat or chicken.

Sometimes, when she is able to, Rosa buys a piglet which she raises on scraps for a few months -- not for the family's own food, but to sell to a meat buyer for profit.

Compared with others who live in their working class district or to the estimated three and a half million living in the city's "colonias perdidas" or slums, the Fernandez family is well off.

In its concern over how well families such as the Fernandez were managing to feed themselves, the Mexican government launched an ambitious farm and food program in 1980. Known as SAM (Sistema Alimentario Mexicano or Mexican Food System) the program was based on a comprehensive food profile completed in 1979. Results indicated that, in a population of 67 million, 35 million were undernourished and 18 million seriously malnourished. Of the latter, 6 million

lived in urban areas.

Because of its size, holding a quarter of the country's population, high priority was given to analyzing the food system of Mexico City. Following the completion of an econometric study, SAM, with the help of Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), began a detailed 18-month socioeconomic study in January of 1982. The project focused on the groups involved in the flow of food supplies from wholesaler to consumer within the city and paid particular attention to the urban poor.

Until recently, all the produce arrived at la Merced, the old warehouse, market, slum and red light district in downtown Mexico City. Because of its traffic snarls, inadequate storage and poor sanitation, successive governments over the decades planned to move the market to a better location. It was only at the end of 1982 that a giant new market, Central de Abastos or Supply Centre, opened in the eastern part of the city. But pumping enormous amounts of concrete into the swampy soil to support the new market's buildings added terribly to construction costs, 600 percent more than estimated. The result has been higher warehouse and, of course, retail prices. But the problem of concentration remains and could have been avoided by decentralizing wholesale operations.

Such concentration was greatly in the interest of the traditionally powerful wholesale monopolies whose control keeps prices artificially high; as much as 1,000 percent can be added to the price between producer and consumer.

Owners of the city's many "fondas", the small restaurants that serve inexpensive hot lunches to workers unable to eat at home, are under pressure to keep their prices affordable to their equally pressed clientele. Research, carried out by urban anthropologist Carmen Bueno, shows that the fondas have been keeping their prices within limits by lowering food quality. They have had to buy spoiled vegetables, which are cheaper, and substitute fillers, often potatoes, for meat. The meat that is used is often a low cost uninspected

product, part of the illegal trade to which Rosa Fernandez will eventually sell her home-grown pig.

If the test of an urban food system is safe and adequate nutrition, how well is Mexico City's system working? Not very well, according to Cynthia de Alcantara, author of several studies on Mexico's food distribution system. With an estimated 80 percent of deaths in the under five age bracket attributable to malnutrition or gastro-intestinal infections, "It is clear that in Mexico one can die from eating as well as from not eating," she says. If a child has been weakened by years of inadequate diet a gastroenteritic attack from contaminated food or insanitary food handling is often fatal.

Evidence that the government is putting its policies into effect came with a crackdown on market speculators, in August. The pending sale of 250 warehouses in the Central de Abastos was cancelled on the grounds that the potential buyers did not represent growers or retailers' associations, but entrepreneurs and speculators. The warehouses will be sold only to bonafide farmers and fruit growers associations, local retailers, merchant organizations and consumer cooperatives.

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